

Two times a day. It was a four-hour journey, and most of the women and children made that walk twice a day. No time for anything else. Not even a moment's respite from the heat of the afternoon. Just walking and carrying. What they carried was a liquid in conflict with itself, a liquid sharing two diabolical identities—life mixed with death. It was both cure and poison. Inside the bucket was a mixture of water, dirt, algae, cow and goat feces, bacteria, mosquito larvae and other insect eggs, parasites, and various waterborne diseases waiting for a host. This is what they walked miles and miles to carry back to their homes. It was a Trojan horse, except most of the women in the village knew that the enemy was hiding in the gift. The choice, which was really no choice at all, was not to drink the water and die, or drink the water and live and, after a while, die. And every person in that village had to make this choice.

They walked across dusty terrain, over hills, and through thickets of brush and rocky fields, winding their way across the ground, the barrier that held below its surface what everyone in that village needed: clean water. Perhaps that is the most frustrating part. Water—clean, healthy water—was just out of reach. Below the ground they walked upon was a wealth of cool drinking water. Like children stretching themselves to reach a cookie jar that had been placed just barely out of reach, these Africans know there is a cure to the stomach problems and the opportunistic diseases and the constant walking and carrying. It is simply a matter of digging deeper than hands can dig. How can it be that a world as small as ours still holds places where people barely hang on to life and so often die for need of something as basic and as easily accessed as clean water?

Our nation is vastly different, and to many of us it is incomprehensible to find that there are nearly three hundred million people in Africa who do not have access to safe drinking water. But I am not going to overload you with stats. To riddle a conversation with grossly tragic statistics—even if they do provide a fuller picture of a crisis—often simply causes us to care less.

In America, we do not wake up wondering if we will have enough water to drink. We do not have to deal with high levels of iron, lead, fluoride, or chlorine. Our bodies stay properly hydrated, so our complexions are smooth and blemish-free; our skin is softer and our muscles have the kind of elasticity necessary to perform in an active environment. Our hair is stronger and healthier; our digestive systems function with regularity; even our brains function more efficiently, giving us an increased threshold for concentration.

But in parts of the world beyond the reach of the bottled-water industry, there are twenty thousand funerals a day for people who struggled to survive without access to any form of clean water or proper sanitation.

The presence of clean water has life-saving effects. Within weeks, villagers notice the absence of stomach problems, and children do not have diarrhea or the pain and exhaustion of malnutrition— clean water flushes out worms and other parasites. Over a short time, hygiene practices can be implemented, and the overall health of a community increases. The food is healthier, and there is more of it, so their bodies are capable of building up stronger immune systems that can fight off all kinds of opportunistic diseases. Cleaner, healthier communities have a much greater chance to thrive, as there is greater potential for villagers to be more productive. In time, the improved health and productivity of the people will give way to indigenous, creative community development, and this can foster better leadership.

The gift of time is also an essential benefit to a community with a clean-water well. Once water is accessible, days normally spent walking and collecting water are used for education and vocational training. People have time to learn a trade or craft. It is truly amazing what water can do. **Water brings hope.** Water is a building block of life and civilization; it is at the heart of industry and commerce. **Those who do not have it die; those who do, live.** And with life comes greater life. **Transforming a community from a hopeless land of funerals into a place of hope and life is hard work.**